

IYASA ÉBOÓ

A Youth-Driven Model for Language Documentation and Revitalization

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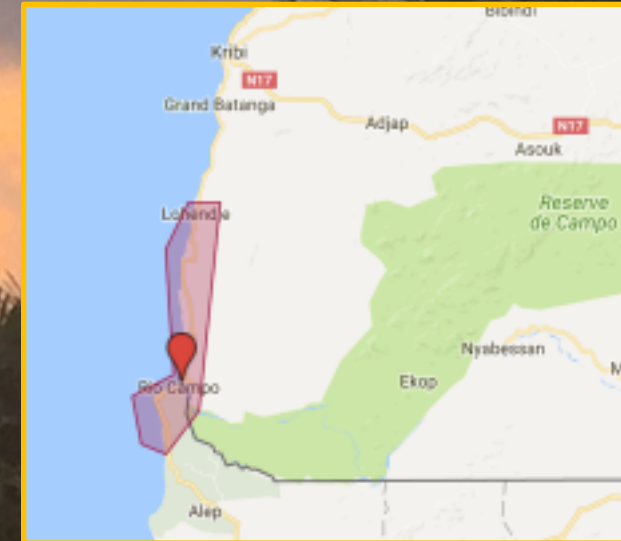
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Iyasa: Background

- Iyasa [ISO 639-3: yko], aka Yasa, Yassa, Iyassa
- Coastal Bantu (A.30) language spoken in Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea
 - *Main Iyasa population center: Campo, pop. 7,000, a growing and heterogeneous town*
- “Threatened” ([Catalogue of Endangered Languages](#) 2018)
- ~1,400–2,400 speakers? (Belew forthcoming)
- **Very underdocumented** - few available language resources or publications



Iyasa: Background

- Coastal culture: focus on fishing, marine resources
- Extensive traditional ecological knowledge of marine life, fishing, and ocean navigation
- Changing climate, changing oceans
- Urbanization in Campo - fewer opportunities for traditional livelihoods
- Many youth joining “rural exodus”



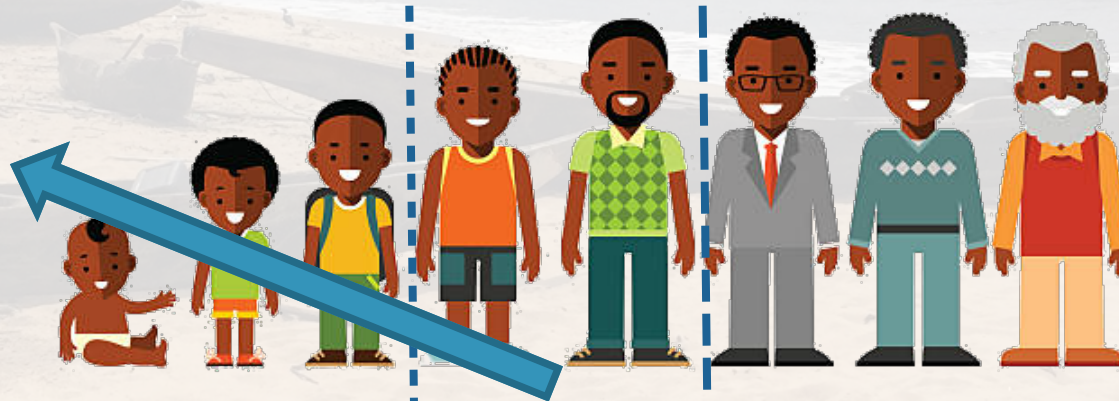
Iyasa: Language situation

- Intergenerational transmission is disrupted, especially in Campo
 - *More language transmission in smaller villages (Ebodje, Lolabe)*
- Many children (pre-teen) have passive language ability only, or limited active ability
- Youth (age 13-30) vary in language ability
- French increasingly the language of everyday life

Iyasa Youth and Language

- **Problem:** intergenerational transmission disrupted around the current youth generation; shift to French ongoing ([Belew 2018](#))

Youth (teens - early 30s): varying Iyasa ability, “tipping point”



Middle-aged and elders:
Strong Iyasa language skills (generally)

Kids (pre-teen): heavily French dominant, mostly passive knowledge of Iyasa (generally)



Iyasa Youth and Language

- **Problem:** Growing disconnect between generations, especially with regard to language
 - *Elders often complain about youth language ability*
 - *Youth are intimidated/estranged by elders' complaints*
 - *Youth have felt excluded from language work carried out by elders*

Iyasa Youth and Language

- **Problem:** No youth educational opportunities in Campo for....
 - *Iyasa culture*
 - *Iyasa language*
 - *Iyasa literacy*
 - *Technology*

Iyasa Youth and Language

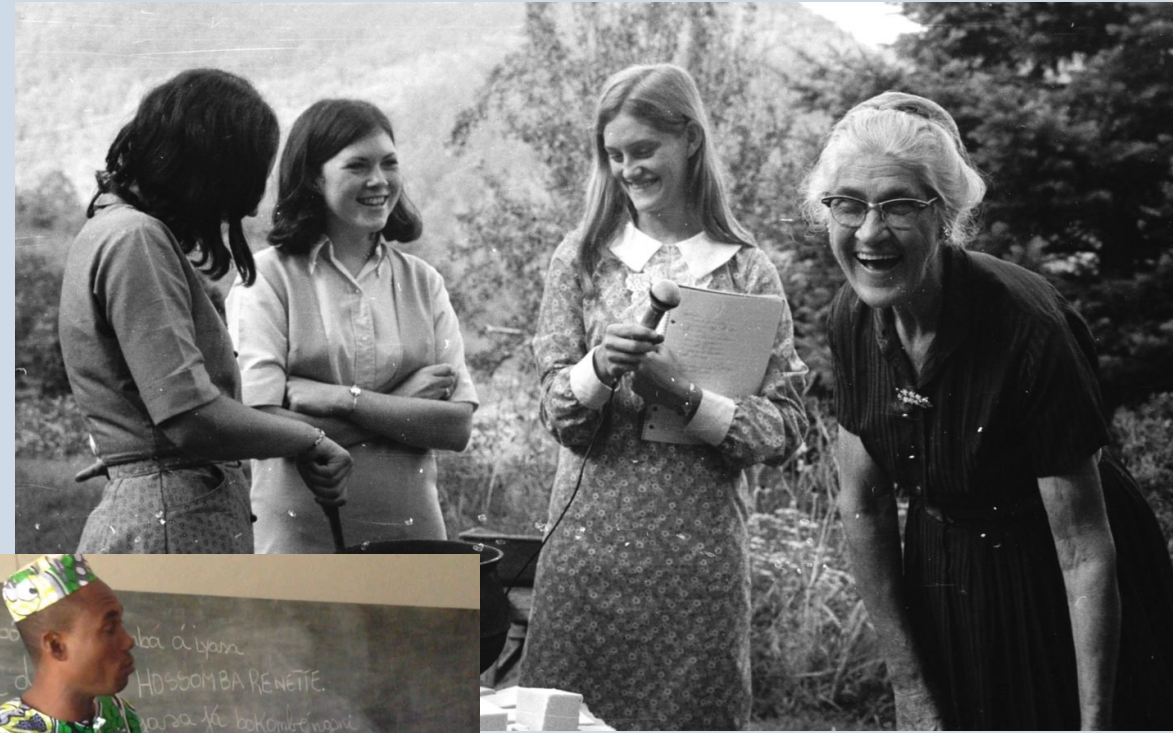
- **IMPORTANTLY, though:** Interest in language and culture among young people!
- In interviews, many youth expressed desire to read/write Iyasa
 - *“I’d like to learn to read Iyasa... but there’s nothing to read.”*
- Many also expressed desire to improve language abilities and cultural knowledge
 - *Didn’t know how to go about it! No clear avenues for learning.*

Iyasa Éboó: Origins

Inspiration: Foxfire Project

Since 1966, has trained youth journalists to document and publish Appalachian traditional knowledge from their elders and neighbors

Publishes youth writings as *Foxfire* magazine



Youth journalists document Appalachian cooking, 1960s



Iyasa notable Albert Ndomi holds a copy of Foxfire at Iyasa Éboó graduation ceremony, 2018

Iyasa Éboó: Origins

Inspiration: Language
Documentation Training
Center

Since 2004, has trained
speakers of more than 120
endangered and under-
documented languages to
document and advocate for
their languages

Publishes speakers'
documentation projects
online



Iyasa Éboó: Goals

- Empower young people to reconnect with, document, publish, and valorize Iyasa language and culture - and pass those skills on to their peers
- Help bridge the disconnect between generations
- Create documentation of Iyasa language and culture
- Spread literacy in new Iyasa alphabet, and generate reading materials for the community
- Teach useful technology skills (no access to computers, cameras, etc. in Campo schools)

Iyasa Éboó: The Workshop

- Initial 2-week workshop in Campo, August 2018
 - *funded in part by Endangered Language Fund - AKÉVA, ELF!*
- 16 youth participants
- 3 instructors (authors + Adolphe Idjabe II), with help from Arnauld Djowe and Braden Brown (SUNY Buffalo)
- Every day, 10 am - 2 pm (while the power was on)
 - *Students chose to run extra days - wanted to learn more*



Iyasa Éboó: The Workshop

- Each day started with fun “warm-up” discussion of traditional ecological, cultural, or linguistic topics
 - “Does anyone know the name/use of this coral?”
 - Traditional storytelling
 - Discussion of language experiences/opinions



Iyasa Éboó: The Workshop

Days 1-4: Language endangerment, documentation, and technology



- Why document languages? And why document Iyasa?
- Interview and documentation techniques
- How to use audio recorders
- How to use computers to copy and listen to audio files

Iyasa Éboó: The Workshop

- Language endangerment was a surprise to many participants - awareness-raising of risks of language shift

“I didn’t realize my language was in trouble. Now that I know, I want to work to do something about it.”

- Excitement at seeing that other youth could author and publish cultural materials

“When I saw those kids in America with their published books, I was so surprised! I thought you had to be a big person to publish a book.... the idea of seeing my name in print pleases me very much.”

Iyasa Éboó: The Workshop

Recording: fun, and a short learning curve!

Used **Zoom H1s** - easy, few buttons/settings

Held practice sessions for audio quality, naturalness, ambient noise



Iyasa Éboó: The Workshop



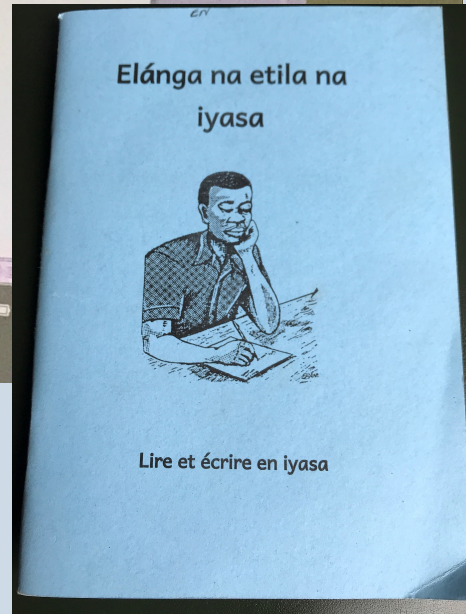
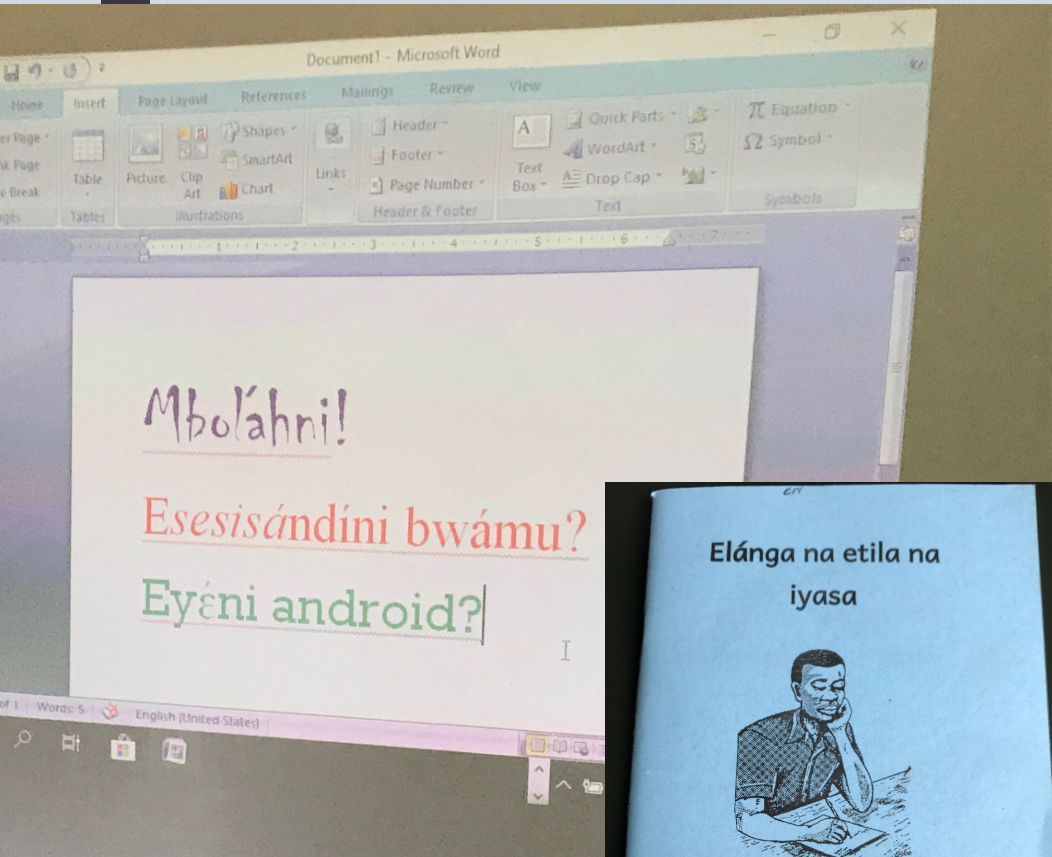
Computers: Steeper learning curve, but young people learn fast!

4 Windows laptops shared between 16 students

USB thumb drives for each student to keep their files and share slides/materials

Huge enthusiasm for computer learning!

Iyasa Éboó: The Workshop



- **Days 5-9:** Writing, reading, and typing in Iyasa
- How to read and write in Iyasa
 - *Newly finalized alphabet by the language committee - alphabet primer launched in 2017*
- How to create, type in, and save Word documents
- How to use an IPA keyboard app to insert special characters (ɛ, ɔ, ɲ, tone markers)

Iyasa Éboó: The Workshop

ENORMOUS enthusiasm for reading and writing in Iyasa!

Instructors had planned on 3-4 days to teach orthography - instead, students mastered the basics by the end of first day

Quick learning curve on Word, IPA keyboard

"I thought this would be so hard! But it's so easy!"



Iyasa Éboó: The Workshop



In evenings and on weekends, students checked out audio recorders to conduct their own interviews with elders, neighbors, family members

During the initial workshop, 48 recordings made on diverse topics: songs, traditional games, marine life, folktales, marriage customs, medicine and healing

Iyasa Éboó: The Workshop



Final few days: working on projects with the skills acquired

- Students worked on transcribing their own recordings, listening to others', writing up their findings
- Instructors available to help as needed
- Instructors opened project office in the evenings, for students who wanted extra practice

Iyasa Éboó: The Workshop

Other activities
during the
workshop period:

Craft challenge:
each student took
the weekend to
create a traditional
craft using free
materials, and
show off their work
to the class



Iyasa Éboó: The Workshop

Other activities during the workshop period:

Daily lunch: workshop funding provided a big lunch each day - after workshop ended at 2 pm, students hung out and ate, socialized, joked **IN IYASA!**



Iyasa Éboó: The Workshop

Dína já majoka : Isóko

Makóó má vémbó : //////////////////////////////////

Ipalwa (mínini) já majoka : Moto abótándí isóko é cėlé é eali á ná wávókwé wálúméce na mwána a mbasa ɔɔ a ebongó... Wá njé mba ɔlécé ekunduwe á iwóí mé jí ké mobóti isóko íménéí alúma jó, wamú eyaíyé makóso é yéé é eali á ná ádokéce wá mepókó. Ké ínye mobóti isóko asunyénjé iwóí íjádú, wávókwé wááyé wamú ekutá mú mepókó... Ebóló á mepókó má movuwi ádokwe éítándí na ebóló á so amú ákóbó. Eíma mé a evóókó é sáámá téɔ na walúmi. Wato wábaá ɔɔ wáá na éteí wálúmánje é etebé mé éyé isóko, náne éóndwéndí ná : "Ebúútá "...

Tína a majoka : Peko a ipulε já ebóta á jambo é mýɔ má wato na iléviyε já epulε á eveciyε á iwɔyí.

Waséi majoka (Wajoki) : Wána wá waámú na wá wadó : ebóló á wato wábaá é etekama éépi

Beéma bá majoka (Bejokini) : Mokódí sowéní ivólongo ; Múyε ngudi ebéce mwá tébe, ɔɔté téɔ mokódí té mokódí múbóonga ké mútekamaka.

Etebé á majoka : É mánga jélété é etebé ééyε mé éyε na cėlé

Eínjé á majoka : Na emánda..

What should the final product be?

- Group voted on name, topic, and structure of resulting publication
- Iyasa Éboó: "Iyasa Forward!"
- Issue #1: Majóka (traditional games)
 - Relevant to young people
 - Endangered knowledge
 - Fun and interesting to the whole community

Iyasa Éboó: Closing Celebration



- An opportunity to show the community (and elders!) the hard work and accomplishments of Iyasa Éboó
- Invited family members, elders, community leaders
- Youth demonstrated their skills in Iyasa writing/reading, audio recording, computer use
- Elders acknowledged, thanked, and gave advice to youth
- Certificates awarded to participants by elders and instructors

Iyasa Éboó: Licéñdi Éboó (We're Going Forward!)

- Momentum was huge!
- Students decided to become an *association*, or organization - elected officers
- Since August 2018, membership has doubled - from 16 to 35 members
- Original participants able to pass on training from workshop to peers



Iyasa Éboó: Licéndi Éboó (We're Going Forward!)

- Regular meetings to work on recordings, transcriptions, writeups
- Majóka (traditional game) days at the beach - learning, practicing, and documenting traditional games (and having fun + building community!)
- Two publications per year planned



Takeaways: Challenges

Funding and equipment

Need laptops, recorders, projector, headphones, (ideally) smartphones/cameras, a printer or funds for printing, a safe and reliable venue/office, and funding for meals/snacks.

Recruitment

Important to involve community youth leaders who could identify participants who'd take the workshop seriously

Buy-in from elders

Important for elders to respect and accept a separate youth activity - if elders leading language work are territorial or skeptical, difficulties can arise

Takeaways: Challenges

Sustainability

Need to ensure youth have the resources, connections, and motivation to “pass the torch” - continue training their peers and sharing their knowledge, as well as organizing participation in cultural events

Youth-led initiatives will vary by community!

This model was successful in Iyasa context because of language shift “tipping point” currently being at the youth level - if youth have *no* language knowledge, this model may not work as well

Takeaways: What Worked

Peer learning

Younger students (teens) had weaker language knowledge; reported that socializing with older peers (20s-30s) helped identify weak spots and learn language, without shame/stigma from elders. (Plus, a little gentle pressure from “big brother/big sister” figures...)

Iyasa language space

The workshop was mostly conducted in Iyasa, as was socializing, gossip, jokes, etc. during down time - not much French used! Disruption of increasingly French-dominant youth spaces.

Most younger participants hadn't had access to an Iyasa space like this, and reported that it helped them speak/listen better.

Youth space

All participants and instructors were young(ish) people - no nervousness, fear, shame in front of elders during learning. (Also: fun, creative, informal atmosphere!)

Takeaways: What Worked

Modeling respectful ways to engage with elders

Giving students a clear path to learn from, and show their seriousness to, elders worked well: elders were impressed, and youth gained motivation/courage to engage with older folks. (Culturally knowledgeable instructors from within the community are a must!)

Valorizing students' knowledge

Participants realized they know more than they thought about culture and language - and that their knowledge is valuable

"I used to think I wasn't so smart, because I struggled at school. But now that I'm writing about something I'm interested in, I realize I'm not stupid - and maybe I can go to university someday..."

Letting youth lead documentation and revitalization

More engagement when youth can choose topics of interest, feel empowered to lead the process in ways most relevant to them (per the Foxfire model; [Starnes 1999](#))



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